Student participation and responsible citizenship in a non-polyarchy: An evaluation of challenges facing Zimbabwe's schools

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This article discusses perceptions on child participation and responsible citizenship in Zimbabwe's secondary schools. A brief outlook on Zimbabwe's values education is provided followed by a discussion of theoretical frameworks on citizenship and polyarchy and what these mean to the school. The article analyses teacher and student perceptions on student participation and responsible citizenship and discusses the outcomes, noting the challenges facing schools in a non-polyarchical environment.

Zimbabwe, child participation, responsible citizenship, democratic education, values education

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe continues to be faced by numerous challenges, probably more than any other country in the history of the earth (Norwegian People's Aid, 2003). Some of these are the AIDS scourge that wipes out thousands of lives a year, the resistant malaria, ethnic conflict, corruption, hunger and deprivation, street kids, dilapidated schools and hospitals, lower life expectancy, political turmoil and socio-economic meltdown which has condemned many to squalor and poverty.

This study departs from an understanding that schools have a moral responsibility not just to teach, but above all, to **practise** democratic values (Griffith, 1998). At best, school life should seek to foster **tolerance**, right to **participation**, **empowerment** and respect for human dignity and individual views. Though intertwined, the micro-politics of the school and macro-politics are somewhat separate, implying that teachers may have some autonomy to provide an environment conducive for the practice of democratic values. The study observes that without the creation of a democratic environment, individual ideas and voices, especially those of children will continue to be stifled.

THE ZIMBABWEAN CONTEXT IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

As part of its values education at secondary school level, Zimbabwe has subjects such as Education for Living, Guidance and Counselling, and Aids Education (Ministry of Education Sports and Culture, 2005). In the majority of schools, these subjects are not taught and in the few schools where they are taught, numerous inhibiting factors abound. On evaluation of these programs, the Ministry records some of the predicaments as weak delivery in the classroom, apathy from school heads and teachers due to lack of knowledge and skills and the psychological impact at a personal level. There are high cases of child abuse, child headed families and an influx of children orphaned by AIDS, leaving teachers with no knowledge of how to handle the students (Ministry of Education Sports and Culture, 2005). Further observation is made that schools are highly examination centred and tend to marginalise non-examinable subjects. Other factors include lack of community involvement and high teacher turn over especially among those trained to handle these subjects. Teachers could also be in difficulty dealing with political questions as

they are often seen as sympathetic to opposition political parties and civil bodies and thus become targeted by the ruling elite (Raftopoulos, 2003). In such a socio-politically challenging environment, fostering active student participation on all aspects of school life could be the only viable route and a great enabler to responsible citizenship education.

RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

Educating towards responsible citizenship explores the notion that children have a sacred, moral, and legal right to be active participants in the search for solutions bedevilling their world of existence. For example, children may benefit from taking a leading role in the fight against AIDS for it is amongst them that infection is greatest. As primary customers of education, it is the children who are daily subjected to the educational process, and thus may contribute constructively to the search for solutions. The notion that children are 'citizens to be and not active citizens' as they pass through school needs revisiting. Parents and teachers must consider striking a proper balance between protecting the child and allowing each child the full right to participate (Flekky and Kaufman, 1997, p.32), as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, Article 12.1 to which Zimbabwe is signatory.

This study takes the view that there are two tendencies in citizenship education. The first one is that which is passive, non-questioning and deferring towards the status quo (Balet and Burton, 2000, p.5). A good example in Zimbabwe is where the government has narrowed national patriotism and citizenship to partisan dictates. This is evidenced in the indoctrination of the youth miltia by the ruling Zanu PF, aiding them to be intolerant and violent towards those seen or perceived as 'different' (*Daily News*, 7/09/2003) and the sending of some headmasters to miltia camps for so-called 're-orientation' (Raftopoulos, 2003). The second and most important form of citizenship education is that which is active, responsible and critical of institutional arrangements (Garratt and Piper, 2002). Twine (1994, p.9) states that in citizenship:

> We are concerned with what kinds of persons we are able to be and the kinds of persons we might be. What kinds of opportunities and constraints confront people in terms of current institutional arrangements?

Responsible citizenship will concern itself with social relationships between people and relationships between people and the institutional arrangements in place, such as the presidency, the judiciary, the parliament, the monarchy or any system of governance. The interdependence of self and society is the focal point of citizenship education since "individuals cannot abstract themselves from their natural and social bonds and still understand themselves" (Parry, cited in Twine 1994, p.10). Responsible citizenship education will create opportunities for pupils to participate actively, debate and appreciate critically the institutions that exist including those within the school, which affect them on a daily basis. In developing responsible citizenship, Freire (1970) argues that educators should socialise learners into active 'namers' of the world and not let others name the world for them. Popper (1945), cited in Bailey (2000, p.11), once said:

> Adoption of rationality is actually a moral decision by society, for its rejection – total surrender to irrationality or blind obedience to other's decisions – invites all the brutalities of totalitarian regimes.

It is no secret that Africa has a catalogued history of brutal regimes that brought untold suffering to its peoples. From current world rankings on democracy, Zimbabwe ranks among the worst nations (World Audit, 2005). School leavers are often recruited under the guise of national service to perpetrate horrendous crimes against citizens (*Daily News*, 7/9/2003). Besides promoting rationality amongst students, responsible citizenship affords students the ability to empathise (to walk in someone's shoes). Tolerance is the key word. As they actively participate and debate issues, they may come to appreciate the challenges and constraints that face different players in

decision-making processes. Beyond the decision-making process is action and that is where empowerment and self-esteem (Bailey, 2000) are crucial. Responsible citizenship will take a risk and allow students opportunities to take a lead and act.

THE STUDY

Following a qualitative approach, the study evaluated the micro-politics of five secondary schools in Zimbabwe against a contextual macro-politics. In an endeavour to explore the two main sub-cultures (rural and urban), two of the schools were urban and the other three were rural. Interesting links were discovered that suggest a strong interrelatedness between the school's micro-politics and macro-politics. Through poetry and written submissions, the so-called 'silent voices' of pupils are afforded the opportunity to be heard, commenting intelligently on wide-ranging issues affecting school life. Referring to "silent voices", Rudduck, cited in Schartz (1993, p.6), defines them as "individuals or groups who have been denied the right to contribute or who have simply not been heard". The study recorded observations on general teacher-pupil relationships and explored cartoons and articles on national media so as to understand the possible impact of macro-politics. Headmasters and teachers were also interviewed to establish their perceptions on student participation and responsible citizenship.

ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

During transcribing of recorded interviews, there was difficulty in retaining the nature and context of the original, and as Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2000, p.282) noted, the social encounter is often lost and only data remain. Transcriptions are decontextualised and frozen. As a result, interviews done with headmasters and teachers were replayed on tape while themes and categories on child participation were sought. During tape playing, account was taken of tone of voice, its inflection, pauses, mood, and way of speaking. These helped towards interpreting the meanings in full. In coding the interviews, Strauss and Corbin's (1998, p.120) third way was used. This is where one perused the entire document or replays the tape and established what was the same or different with earlier or already coded documents as laid down below. Some of the words were italicised as part of the coding process. The italicised and bold words helped to form categories. The same was done to all data collected.

Activity 1: Teacher-pupil interaction (Summary of Observations)

The narrative covers some aspects of teacher-pupil interaction.

It is the month of June and the temperatures are freezing. At this time of the year, daytime is slightly shorter, which means that the sun rises late and sets early. When the school bell rings, those students approaching school *run for dear life* **[authoritarian]** fearing they will be closed out of the assembly point and face punishment. Those arriving a few minutes late soon go into the prefect's notebook **[policing]**. *As usual, the senior teacher conducts* **[element of control]** the assembly. Songs are led and prayers made, then it is class time. But as they jostle into their classrooms, there are *murmurs of disapproval* **[voicelessness]** of the school starting times. Those not boarding at school may have a point because they walk long distances to school. Some claim that leaving their homes early (obviously when it is dark) exposes them to dangerous wild animals. But avenues of *communication seem closed* [**voicelessness**], and *none seems to mind* **[non-caring]**. The school always starts at 7:20 a.m. and ends at 4 p.m., regardless of changing seasons. For teachers, it is easy because they are housed a stone's throw from the school **[inequality]**.

In the classroom it is common that a teacher's question brings dead silence, but the *teacher has to complete the syllabus* **[non-caring]** so she goes on anyway. Every afternoon, approximately 20

per cent of the pupils face punishment based on a variety of offences (lateness included), *and some pretend to like it* **[denial**], **[challenging status quo]**). While some go for sports or social clubs or studies, those punished have to work under *stern supervision* [**policing],** at any designated site. Staff meetings are held fortnightly. Pupils are *talked about* **[misrepresentation]** *and not talked with*. Issues such as the selection of prefects, school trips, sports and social programs are decided upon *by teachers in their wisdom* [**misrepresentation]**. One teacher suggests involving pupils in teacher appraisal. *He is ridiculed* **[intolerance]** and the suggestion shot down. He is told that the *calibre of pupils is inadequate* **[prejudicial].** Before the last bell a number of pupils would have *slipped away* **[challenging status quo]** only to face punishment in future, usually after *days of non-attendance* **[non-caring].** In their dealing with parents (while promoting projects), teachers are always quick to point out that all is done *in the interest of the child* **[hypocritical][misrepresentation]**.

Activity 2: Students written comments

The contributions are intelligent and show a greater degree of knowledge as to what issues need addressing in the schools. Some of the comments are as follows:

> *I want my school to develop and become better than it is.*
>
> *My school is very poor and that we have no qualified headmaster.*
>
> *Our library is empty, we need help.*
>
> *There is too much favouritism in this school. Our class always gets torn books.*

From some of the comments made, one is left wondering why pupils are left out in reaching workable decisions, since they are often the ones who are primarily affected and genuinely concerned. Issues range from personal welfare to teacher performance. Indications are that pupils are not consulted on wide ranging issues such as learning and management processes or on their social activities.

Activity 3: Students' poetry

The study critically analyses poetry from secondary school students to establish themes and perceptions on issues affecting the micro-politics of the school. The study weighs their tone so as to understand the micro-politics of the schools and how it also over-extends into macro-politics. Though there is often ridicule of some issues happening in the school, such as 'dagga' or 'marijuana' smoking, the tone of most pupils is one of despair and disillusionment. For example, one poem on national economic meltdown reads, "Gone are the days when the dollar used to be a dollar" and "gone are the days when Zimbabwe used to be Zimbabwe". A lot of sad things are happening around students, some of them unknown to teachers, for example, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy. But because students are not active participants in the micro-politics of the school, they do not have a sense of ownership and responsibility to find or assist in reaching solutions. More often, their poetry is that of raising issues and not suggesting solutions.

[critical of peers]	They (students) are lazy and impolite.
[challenge authority]	They drag their feet.
[element of control] [passive]	Wait for the teacher to instruct them.
[peer pressure]	Laugh at nothing.
[misunderstandings]	When the teacher asks a question in class, there is a dead silence.

Activity 4: Head-teachers and teachers interviews

Interviews were made with teachers and head-teachers to gauge the mood amongst them as so-called 'gatekeepers' of schools on issues of child participation and to explore possibilities for generating commitment in this area. All the head-teachers fully agreed that child participation was minimal both inside and outside the classroom. Some noted that even teachers were constrained by the education process. Teachers often focused on completing the syllabus (teaching the subject as opposed to teaching children). The interaction helped take on board contexts that created less democratic teachers. One head-teacher repeatedly expressed the fear that child participation if not closely monitored could be disruptive. The notion that children could not responsibly participate kept reverberating. Some headmasters noted the importance of sharing information especially with elected students such that students did not participate with so-called 'empty heads.'

[Self-aware]	Non-participation still prevalent. Pupils' viewpoints are not taken.
[Authoritarian]	Teachers also receive commands.
[Non-caring]	Syllabus coverage is paramount as required by the Ministry of Education. (Teaching the subject and not pupils)
[Information]	Our teaching should arm students with information so as to enable them to participate.
[Progressive]	Pupils need guiding by adults in their participation.
[Non-caring]	The school is examination-centred.
[Information]	Should teach civil rights and promote democratic lifestyles.
[Element of control]	Too much freedom to pupils can be disastrous.
[Progressive]	Prefects often participate responsibly in society after leaving school. Maybe we should allow more students to participate.

Activity 5: The schools micro-politics and the macro-political dimension

The study collected a profile of cartoons and excerpts on topical issues from a daily newspaper in order to reflect on these macro-politics in the country and how these related to the micro-politics of the school. The tendency just to raise issues and not seek solutions (as seen in children's poetry) was also prevalent in national politics. There was an element of passivity, as shown in the cartoon where after a failed weak push to dislodge the ruling party, people's hands appeared folded, (*Daily News*, 6/6/2003) and responsibility was left to other citizens. In another cartoon, the Minister of Information was seen struggling, carrying a massive knobkerrie, which was meant to suppress press freedom and punish journalists (*Daily News*, 25/1/2003). In a bid to oppress, he seemed himself oppressed and he followed his masters passively. More striking resemblances were formed as one scurries from one cartoon or item to the next, with regard to issues of passivity and non-participation by pupils at school. Oftentimes pupils could not express their views, because the culture in the school was sometimes that of "see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil" as in national politics (*Daily News*, 7/9/2003). One also noted that at times, what the administration would like to project as happening in the institution was often different from the actual, whether it was by design or accident. Sometimes the punishment of pupils was unorthodox, as in national politics. One of the cartoons depicted a woman, (mother Zimbabwe) being physically abused by her husband (the Government), yet purporting to love her, just the same as teachers who claimed to be doing everything in the interest of the child.

Summary of all Categories

From italicised codes at every instance to developing categories, the depiction presented in Table 1 is a summation of outcomes (categories) on child participation outlook in the secondary schools studied.

Table 1. Summary of perceptions on child participation

A.	Intolerance	B.	Controlled	C.	Inequality
	Authoritarian		Participation		Hypocritical and prejudicial
	Non-caring		Element of control		Adult freedom
	Policing		Irresponsible		
D.	Silent voices	E.	Challenging status quo	F.	Information/knowledge
	Voicelessness		Misrepresentation		Self-awareness
	Denial		Disillusionment		Progressive
			Peer pressure		Critical of peers

DISCUSSION OF CHALLENGES

From Table 1, it is noted that child participation and freedom are greatly curtailed in Zimbabwe's secondary schools. There is a saying that 'Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin'. The lack of student freedom to participate in the educational process has adverse consequences for responsible citizenship. Though schools are often seen as a mirror of their societies (Forster 1977, cited in Gould 1993), it is also true that for time immemorial, education has served as an agent for cultural change (Griffith, 1998), and that seems to be an urgent challenge facing Zimbabwe's schools in citizenship education, if a truly democratic and polyarchical culture is to be established and sustained.

A Polyarchical Model: A Challenge to Zimbabwe's Schools

Polyarchy is a paradigm of democracy that seeks the empowerment of individuals and communities in a way that neither they (individuals or communities) nor the state dominate the other (Dahl 1989). In many parts of Africa, totalitarian democracy often takes root where the state, under the guise of sovereignty, brutalises the minority and individuals. Such democracy becomes characterised as "everything for the state, from the state and by the state" (Polyarchy Organisation 2002). Despite gross violation of human rights, such countries still claim to be democracies. For Africa we remain stuck with an empty word, democracy. In the twenty-first century, polyarchy may offer hope to African communities who are largely divided by ethnicity (Salih 2001). While conscious of universal principles, communities use local custom to address specific general realities. It is on this understanding that the study of responsible citizenship in Zimbabwe's secondary schools is based. In a polyarchy, communities and individuals actively participate and are free to link up with or in with any community, and also free to opt out or split up (Polyarchy Organisation 2002).

Zimbabwe experienced ethnic conflict soon after independence in 1980 (Human Rights Forum, 2003), and more than 20 years on, the nation still faces political and economic demise through internal strife (Raftopoulos, 2003). Against this background, citizenship education in Zimbabwe's secondary schools should seek to bolster issues of participation, tolerance, accountability and empowerment. Furthermore, schools need not just adopt but adapt forms of democratic practices that nurture the community spirit and meet global demands. The so-called 'gatekeepers' of a school have a duty to create a satisfactory educational environment (Bernstein 1970) upon which a polyarchical culture can be founded. A commitment to **practise** and not just teach polyarchical values needs generation.

> Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of enquiry is one of violence. (Freire 1970, p.66)

The challenge to educators is that every child passing through the schooling system possesses unique ideas and individuality, and thus an opportunity presents itself to engage the child actively so as to influence positively the sustenance of a polyarchical culture.

Independent Learning

Reflecting on the education system in Zimbabwe's secondary schools, one is astounded by levels of lack of participation or non-participation by students. As Harber (1995, p.5) noted in his wide-ranging study:

> In most African schools, the classroom is highly structured ... The teacher ... exercises unquestioned authority in such matters as seating arrangements, movement, controlling and initiating all types of interaction within the group.

The fact that the teacher exercises unquestioned authority in the classroom perpetuates a culture of non-tolerance. As a result, students gradually become moulded into passive, non-questioning citizens who will worship the leader or any institutional arrangement and dare not oppose the tide. Aristotle once wrote:

> It is useless to have the most beneficial rules of society fully agreed on by all who are members of the polity if individuals are not going to be trained and have their habits formed for that polity. (Harber1995, p.1)

Teachers may not be able to draw up a curriculum based on democratic values or have the opportunity to teach these values because of the macro-political environment, but they have ample opportunity to practise and apply democratic values across the whole spectrum of the educational process within the school and that comes across as the major challenge.

The Macro-Political Dimension

In the macro-politics, where passivity is reflected, one can safely allude to claims that "blind obedience to other's decisions invites all the brutalities of totalitarian regimes" (Popper 1945, cited in Bailey 2000). A strong case for child participation still stands if quality education and the quality of life in the school and beyond is to be enhanced. If schools are to be sensitive and quality-conscious institutions, the bringing of children into the realm of decision-making processes will go a long way in addressing despondency and poor quality of education. Moreover, students will learn not just to address school problems but the challenges that face them as adult national citizens after schools.

Voicelessness

The voicelessness of students within the educational process is counter-productive to responsible citizenship. As children grow, so does their capacity to make decisions. Freire (1970, p.69) observes that, "human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words ... human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work in action-reflection".

Zimbabwe and many of its schools are passing through forms of a crisis of development (a battered economy and dilapidated schools). Oftentimes those in the lead are starved of ideas. This study explores an argument that children are a source for a wealth of ideas if properly nurtured and encouraged to participate, as evidenced in the Madagascar case where 90 students from schools presented an action plan to the National Assembly (Unicef, 2004). Furthermore, the study argues that since children are the primary customers of education (Sallis 1996, p.25), educators cannot easily dismiss them out of hand if schools are to be quality-conscious organisations. For some in leadership, the process of consultation is like taking a step backward, and as Tocqueville (cited in Wepman 1985, p.9) observes, "it is easy to issue commands and enforce them."

However, the wise words of Confucius are worth reflecting on: "Sometimes, in order to go forward, one must take a step backward".

Real Student Participation

"Half-hearted attempts at pupil involvement are seen as worse than useless, a smokescreen which is easily seen through" (*The Guardian,* 17/7/90, cited in Harber 1995). Most students are likely to notice a patronising staff that keeps them away from significant issues and the consequences could be adverse, for example, strikes or disruptive tendencies. **Co-operation** across relationships existent in a school are vital. The "banking" concept of education as described by Freire (1970), where teachers are 'the haves' and students 'the have nots', is discouraged. The banking concept of education is seen as mechanistic (as evidenced in the examination centred curriculum), static and naturalistic and it promotes a spatial view of consciousness, which transforms students into receiving objects. If a school decides to have a student council, teachers should be prepared to broker an honest two-way relationship, and students should be encouraged not to see each other as competitors but partners in an education process:

> Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. (p.64)

Problem-posing education (responsible citizenship) to this end empowers teachers and students to become subjects (not objects) of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism. It enables them to overcome false consciousness. Marshall (1997) warns that, in their effort to produce responsible citizens, teachers should not mistake presence for participation. Students should not just be present as hearers, but should be encouraged to talk and act within a process.

The Challenge at Secondary School

Without necessarily implying that democratic education can only work at secondary levels, the study observes that the majority of students at secondary school can "formulate views and opinions" (United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, Article 12:1). Gould (1993, p.65) also notes that in Africa:

> The political role of schools is greater at secondary and higher levels where not only are the institutions more prestigious and command more resources, but the students are politically aware and politically active.

The role of responsible citizenship education at secondary level would be to inculcate political values and lifestyles that are akin to a polyarchical culture, where the state, school authorities or any polity (including the student council) does not exercise absolutist power. Teachers and Head-teachers often wield massive power within the school environs. The challenge for them is to be mindful of the culture they bring into the school by creating opportunities for power sharing, not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end.

Limitations of the Study

Though the study has achieved a deeper understanding of teacher and pupils' perceptions on student participation in Zimbabwe's secondary schools, an opportunity still exists for deeper exploration of the phenomenon through case studies, paying particular attention to different sub-cultures and educational levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the activities in the research process have overwhelmingly helped the study to conclude safely that for Zimbabwe's schools the path towards responsible citizenship will continue to elude educators unless child participation is taken seriously. Democratic education seeks to liberate thought, promote tolerance, build meaningful relationships and empower. The learning and work processes in schools seem not to favour such an ethos. Many schools still operate like factories (Harber 1995), of which the end products are children "fit for a purpose" (Sallis 1994). In view of existing levels of intolerance, authoritarianism, non-caring attitude, student voicelessness, Zimbabwe's teachers are faced with a challenge to rethink and redefine the school culture. There is also a need to equip teachers and headmasters with knowledge and skills on how best to handle students in a way that will perpetuate a polyarchical culture in the school and beyond. Structures such as school councils may be set up and assisted towards this goal.

It is also noted that most governments (especially in a non-polyarchy) may not be interested in educating towards responsible citizenship because of future implications if the government is irresponsible. In such a challenging environment, schools, often seen as custodians of culture, may not need to wait for an official curriculum but may, through a conscious decision, strive to incorporate democratic values in the way they relate, teach and manage student affairs.

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